

TACIT DANGERS: A REEXAMINATION OF KUHN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO
COMPOSITION STUDIES

By

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To Stephen M. North, for his efforts to create possibilities for knowledge; and to my father
Ricardo Paez for the same

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The question of whether composition studies is, constitutes, or should adopt a Kuhnian paradigm has not been the subject of sustained scholarly attention since the mid-1980s. Many composition scholars have seen fit to leave this meta-theoretical question behind to focus on more specific practical and theoretical issues. What has not been left behind, however, is the tacit acceptance Kuhn's terms and ideas, often divorced from each other as well as from their original context. This is problematic because common use of the term *paradigm* to refer to disciplinary knowledge, which is now always an allusion to Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, invokes only part of his theory—usually a generalized version of social constructionism.

Kuhn's term is meant to describe specific communities which share metaphysical as well as epistemological and ontological assumptions, making it only mildly synonymous with such terms as "zeitgeist," "weltanschauung," "perspective," "theory," "discourse community," and even "social construction" itself. This is, in part, for two reasons: First is Kuhn's understanding of *exemplars*—those epistemically specific and historically embedded procedure-discoveries on which paradigmatic sciences base their work. Second is the ontological nature of the hard sciences. Ironically, careless application of Kuhnian terminology can create the very 'theoretical incommensurability' which caused scientists to resist Kuhn's depiction of their work.

In this essay, I reexamine the history of 'paradigm-talk' in composition studies and present a reading of Kuhn which illustrates that the structures Kuhn found in science do not exist in composition (or the humanities in general). Ultimately, while Kuhn's approach may be valuable, his description of science itself is not parallel to a similarly constructed description of composition studies.

CHAPTER 1
A PARADIGMATIC COMPOSITION?

Introduction

A review of composition's flagship journals—the *JAC*, *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and the *Journal of Basic Writing*—will reveal a curious state of affairs: independent scholars addressing isolated issues, with few, if any, signs of what could be considered a common disciplinary thread. True, the scholarship represented in these journals tends to focus on student writing and the writing classroom, with occasional work on writing and writing subjects outside of the classroom. But unfortunately, even someone steeped in the field will find it difficult to locate the kinds of disciplinary agreements and conventions which make other disciplines both coherent and productive.

It is important for me to be particularly clear on this point. It is a good thing that composition as a field is open to a vast range of subject matters, theoretical approaches, and research foci, as well as being capable of widely varied social, ideological, and interpersonal investigations. This type of vitality is its greatest strength. However, given the history of the field and considering its foreseeable future, such diversity is also its greatest weakness. Unlike their peers in neighboring fields—say, in literary or cultural studies, or in education—compositionists have abandoned the basic elements of effective intra-disciplinary discourse. The occasional debate on idiosyncratic subjects notwithstanding, it seems that compositionists have agreed to disagree on all matters of methodology and epistemology, of ontology and ideology, to the point that the typical issue of *JAC* or *CCC* is populated by a collection of individual, non-accumulative ventures. This can be verified by a simple procedure: hand any randomly chosen compositionist any randomly chosen issue of the *JAC* or *CCC* and ask him or her to explain what is going on—what dialog is being engaged—in any given article. More often than not, the lack of consensus

on even the most basic of research methodologies will render a good number of the journal's articles irrelevant and inconsequential as far as our random compositionist is concerned. That outsiders have a difficult time understanding a field's internal goings-on is perhaps problematic. But it is simply unacceptable when those trained in it can't see through the disciplinary trees.

Another way of putting this problem—the import of which will become clear later on in this essay—is as follows: The textbooks we use to teach our students tend to orbit several clusters of key terms, methodologies, and ontological conventions: Aristotelian rhetoric; Toulmin's theory of argumentation; a general focus on audience, situation, and exigency; and, of course, a selection of topical readings. However, the 'textbooks' we use to teach ourselves—namely, the monographs, edited collections, and journal articles—share few of these potential starting points. Indeed, these topics are rarely discussed in the rhetoric and composition graduate classroom or in the forums of scholarly discourse except in the most theoretical terms. 'Anything goes' is the rule, and the rule has become all but law. To criticize a fellow scholar's theoretical arguments, let alone his or her pedagogical praxis, is tantamount to a personal attack and therefore inappropriate. By agreeing to disagree, we have set out to define the field of composition by refusing to define it, creating an unlikely but nonetheless actual disciplinary rubric where instead of studying rhetoric we study around it.

The first question we are left with is 'to what end?' The second is 'why?' As for the first question, I can only point to the journals with the best of wishes. perhaps one will find an article that leads to a productive—if only in the most individualistic, isolated sense of the term—'random walk'. Or one might find a smorgasbord of topics, tenuously related. The focus of the following essay is the second question, that of why the field is such. I argue that this disciplinary 'incommensurability' is a direct descendant of the 'paradigm' and 'science' wars which lead

many compositionists to question what, if any, kind of paradigm composition studies should embody or be embodied by. This question—which is much more complex than it initially seems—began with an explicit engagement with and lead, ultimately, to a tacit acceptance of Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

This resulting engagement and acceptance led us down the roads of incommensurability, where every scholar operates in isolation and produces results which, while perhaps valuable, do not connect and cohere into a disciplinary discourse. As such we are left with a field which is not unlike a Las Vegas casino, where individual scholars, though vaguely associated with each other by interest in a similar payoff, are pulling on the arms of their own slot machines, isolated from their peers who are—literally and disciplinarily—just a seat or two away.

The Problem With Paradigms

In a 2007 paper for the Society for Critical Exchange’s convention on “Writing Empires I: Composition and the Expansion of English,” Jessica Yood reappraises the term paradigm—Thomas Kuhn’s description of disciplinary structure and change in the sciences—as applied to composition studies:

For far too long the academy in general and English studies in particular have been charmed, obsessed, and, now, paralyzed by the lure of the paradigm. Since Thomas Kuhn coined the term in 1962, scholars in English have defined the field’s health according to some paradigm fitness test. (Yood, “Post-Paradigm”)

This sentiment is expressed in a stronger form in the abstract to Yood’s 2005 paper, “Present-Process: The Composition of Change”:

Because the writing-process movement has been deemed our field’s founding “paradigm”—at least since [Maxine] Hairston’s 1982 essay [“The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing”] declared it so—“process” has remained stuck in the philosophical and historical assumptions of a “paradigm.” The paradigm theory has, from its first associations with composition, offered a view of change wholly unsuited to work in writing. (1)

Making reference to Kent's introduction to "Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm," Yood questions the supposedly paradigmatic structure of composition as a discipline. "Is being 'post' paradigmatic? Is paradigmatic an accurate way of describing writing as public" (5) or, for that matter, as anything?

The term paradigm, introduced by Richard Young and expanded on by Hairston, connotes institutional, pedagogical, and historical awareness (and not a little revolutionary rhetoric). And there is no doubt that the term, however variously used, had a generative effect on the composition's self-reflective studies.¹ But it has reduced possibilities for the field. Paradigms did give us a way to think about the possibility of disciplinary unification—under the inseparable banners of a "best" theory, a well defined tool set, and an overriding inter-institutional goal. However, as Yood rightly points out, for composition to develop a "best" theory (along the lines of a scientific "big" theory) compositionists will have to stop being compositionists: "as it turns out, scholars of writing, culture, rhetoric, and literature are not the kind of revolutionaries that Kuhn was talking about. We don't ebb and flow as much as expand and revise" ("Post-Process"). In other words, the disciplinary unification we could develop under the rubric of paradigms would leave us unable to develop any other form of disciplinary unity—an alternative way of coming together which Yood argues would be more effective for English studies.

The argument is a reasonable one: we must abandon the idea of composition paradigms first because our discipline is not paradigmatic (we are packrats, Yood suggests, not revolutionaries) and second because the term paradigm, especially when yoked to the term process (the "writing process paradigm"), interferes with what we need to do: build

¹ Paradigm-talk, according to Yood, "ushered in much of the theoretical turns that defined the 1970's and 1980's, helped distinguish cultural studies from those turns, and formed the vocabulary of early manifestos arguing for the modern discipline of composition" ("Post-Paradigm").

interconnectivity between “our programs and cultures,” integrate “the many strands of our discipline,” and, alongside this “attunement,” the development of an institutional structure which makes the best use of the people and programs which are dedicated to the research of writing. We still need a name for all of this, however, and the name Yood proposes is *process*—taken from Maxine Hairston’s “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” but divorced from Hairston’s talk of paradigms and revolutions. This new process “is exactly what is useful to us now, not as a ‘Big Theory’ of how individuals compose, but as way to talk about the power of change constructed within literary programs in our local communities” (Yood, “Present-Process” 2).

Yood explicitly states that she is not on a quest for a master narrative, nor to resurrect “the writing process (prewriting, drafting, revising)—a process that ignored the complex realities of rhetorical situations” (“Post-Process”). Quite the opposite: her goal is to avoid any structure that “keeps us contained in some version of disciplinarity that ignores how programs move policy and epistemology” (“Post-Process”). Yood’s focus, then, is on disciplinary and institutional issues. While such issues are necessarily important, as is her critique of paradigm-thinking in composition, Yood’s argument is ultimately an attempt (and I believe a successful one) to salvage Hairston’s argument from itself. But also needed is a deeper look at the history of paradigms in composition—an understanding not only of Hairston’s argument but of the larger discussion it took part in. As long as paradigms are invoked in composition’s discourse—the title of Kent’s collection being but one example—we should have a firmer grasp on what exactly paradigms are, how the term became a ‘power word’ in composition, and, ultimately, a clear understanding of how composition’s epistemological and ontological foundation precludes a paradigmatic structure.

Paradigms, Paradigms Everywhere

As Yood and others have pointed out, the term “paradigm” has been a mainstay of composition studies (and the humanities in general) since Richard Young’s 1978 “Paradigms and Problems” invoked Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Originally used by Kuhn to refer to institutionally-bound eras of theoretical, methodological, and epistemological stability separated by periods of acute professional crisis in the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ sciences, the term has been adapted by theorists of composition to refer to a variety of constructs ranging from the de facto state of the field to a hoped-for utopian vision of its future to individual theorists’ positions on disciplinary matters. While English studies has a long history of borrowing theories, terminologies, and methodologies from a wide range of fields, this abridged borrowing of Kuhn’s thesis has led to tacit acceptance of its premises by the composition community. Uncritical acceptance of these premises has had several effects on the field, particularly regarding methodology.

A review of composition’s professional literature will show that methodology—the means by which we define, collect, and analyze evidence—has been one of the most contested issues in composition studies. Unfortunately, it is one that is no longer discussed as such. Other human sciences (such as psychology, sociology, and the educational sciences) have found constructive and complimentary ways to discuss and debate their methods and the evidence and knowledge acquired through the application of those methods. More importantly, these fields have learned to use knowledge generated outside of their typical fields (psychology’s use of biochemical and evolutionary theories, sociological insights inspired by emergence and chaos theories) without being overwhelmed by any one field or focus. Composition, however, seems unable to come to terms with itself and its selection of methodologies. This is due, I believe, to its location in the larger field of English studies. There, academic training and professional interests require such

active and constant interpretation of texts, contexts, and ideologies that it becomes nearly impossible to read published research without interpretive hostility (Peter Elbow's "believing game" notwithstanding). Our often incomplete understanding of Kuhn has convinced us that all professional discourse either is or should be enmeshed in a paradigm, regardless of field or focus of inquiry. This, in turn, has led to fixations on scientism, contra-scientism, and so-called theoretical incommensurability. To understand this disciplinary roadblock we must understand first the history of paradigms in composition and second Kuhn's original formulation of scientific paradigms. Thus, in the first part of this paper I explore a few of the most prominent uses of the term "paradigm" in composition, the various meanings that have been ascribed to it, and the effects such "paradigm-talk" has had on the field.

The Question of Paradigms, 1978–1983: Part One

Four major articles published between 1978 and 1983 heralded the introduction of paradigm-talk in composition studies. In his 1978 article, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention", Richard Young uses Thomas Kuhn's theorization of scientific revolutions to describe the current state of composition studies. According to Young, composition as seen through the lens of Kuhn's theory was a profession whose dominant theory, current-traditional rhetoric, could no longer solve the problems set before it. Using the example of rhetorical invention as one anomalous point from which this crisis sprung, Young argues that a new paradigm of composition, incompatible with current-traditionalism, was becoming dominant. Four years later Maxine Hairston echoed Young's description in her article "Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing". Also arguing that composition was in a state of paradigm shift, Hairston believed that the shift from current-traditional to writing-process rhetoric was due primarily to current-traditional rhetoric's inability to accommodate the relevant discoveries of extra-disciplinary research and the needs of the large

population of non-traditional students entering universities across the country (c.f. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*).

Patricia Bizzell, in her 1979 “Thomas Kuhn, Scientism, and English Studies”, agrees with Hairston’s description of composition as paradigmatic but strongly opposes her view that empiricism is the right choice for composition’s new paradigm². Arguing that the empiricism on which the sciences are built is exactly what causes their paradigmatic myopia, she advocates instead a composition whose primary business is to study the paradigmatic “shared languages” of different communities. Robert Connors, taking a much stronger stance in his 1983 “Composition Studies and Science”, directly questions the parallels between composition and the sciences on which Kuhn bases his study. Connors not only argues against the validity of an empirically-dominated humanities but denies the possibility of Kuhnian paradigms outside the natural sciences.

In Young, Hairston, and Bizzell’s arguments, Kuhn’s theory of paradigmatic change in “normal sciences”³ is adapted to composition studies to create what George Pullman has termed a “rhetorical narrative” (see Pullman, *Stepping*, and below). On the one hand, talk of paradigms and paradigm shifts has provided a useful analogy, helping make possible the asking of new questions and the application of new research to writing pedagogy and theory. On the other hand, overenthusiastic use of Kuhn’s methodology (and loose borrowing of his terminology) since Young has galvanized discourse and discovery in composition studies. The net result of this

² Which leads to the question, which I will address later in this essay, of whether or not composition can be paradigmatic in the Kuhnian sense at all. Indeed, this question is the crux of the current essay: if Kuhnian paradigms describe a particular set of disciplines which operate in a particular way for particular reasons (i.e., the sciences), the question is whether or not the humanities operate in the same way or not. If there is a significant difference we must recognize it both verbally and theoretically.

³ I.e., those realms of inquiry based on empirical observation of a positivist reality such as physics and chemistry.

“paradigm talk” has estranged otherwise harmonious epistemologies, all but bringing about Stephen North’s worst-case scenario of composition’s future: one in which “each of its constituent [knowledge-making] communities will be absorbed by some other field with a compatible methodology” (365). As Connors succinctly puts it, “Kuhn’s terms, applied analogically as a claim for the essentially scientific or pre-scientific nature of the discipline [has] lead us only to blind alleys or to unrealistic expectations” (17).

In the following pages I will consider Young and Hairston’s pro-paradigm narratives, the alternative-paradigm narrative of Patricia Bizzell, and the contra-paradigm response of Robert Connors. I argue that composition ignored Robert Connors’ argument that composition is not paradigmatic, which has had several negative effects on its development.

Richard Young: Paradigm Shift as an Allegory for Composition’s “Crisis”

According to Richard Young’s narrative, what compositionists have referred to as current-traditional rhetoric can be seen as a Kuhnian paradigm:

...since the beginning of the century, the teaching and researching of composition have been guided by what Thomas Kuhn (1970) has called a ‘paradigm,’ a system of widely shared values, beliefs, and methods that determines the nature and conduct of the discipline. A paradigm determines, among other things, what is included in the discipline and what is excluded from it, what is taught and not taught, what problems are regarded as important and unimportant, and, by implication, what research is regarded as valuable in developing the discipline. (29)

As English professors and instructors were trained primarily in the study of literature, their paradigm privileged the written product over the writing process, editing over exigency, and style over situation. In other words, the “shared values” of the community operating under the current-traditional paradigm are what Richard Young terms vitalist, a holdover from Romanticism which “leads to a repudiation of the possibility of teaching the composing process, hence the tendency of current-traditional rhetoric to become a critical study of the products of composing and an art of editing” (31). Ultimately, as current-traditionalists forced to teach

“basic” writers were much more interested in the written work than in the work of writing, their pedagogy ignored or mystified rhetorical invention.

Young sees Kuhn’s description of crisis and revolution in science as parallel to current-traditional rhetoric’s inability to address invention. In his view, current-traditional privileging of product over process and its mystification of “the natural powers of the mind and the uniqueness of the creative act” (31) made researching or teaching invention irrelevant if not impossible. Invention was seen either as the object of a different community’s inquiry or as a process “not susceptible to conscious control by formal procedures” (32). This blind spot was addressed with *ad hoc* solutions (to use Kuhn’s term) in the form of apparently invention-less writing assignments. Students were instructed to address easily researched writing prompts, write from experience, or respond to stimuli such as anthologized essays or “look-think-write” visuals (see Young, 33). Focusing on issues of correctness and usage, current-traditionalists saw no need to address invention, substituting its instruction with such prompts under the assumption that real-world writing situations would provide sufficient exigency on their own. As Kuhn points out repeatedly, however, *ad hoc* solutions allow professionals to avoid problems such as these for only so long.

Current-traditional pedagogy had served so well for so long that its theoretical assumptions had become “presuppositions rather than subjects for investigation” (32). As Young’s review of the literature reveals, however, the growing concern over invention—variously called pre-writing, discovery, analysis, and synthesis—called current-traditional presuppositions to question. Having structured his narrative of composition as a professional field entering a crisis state, Young is able to claim that composition parallels Kuhn’s paradigmatic disciplines:

A paradigm acquires wide support by demonstrating its superior ability to solve problems generally acknowledged by those in the discipline to be acute and fundamental; once it is

established, research is directed primarily toward its articulation and application. New problems arise, however, which those committed to the paradigm cannot solve adequately, and a crisis develops, accompanied by a sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the profession. The response to the crisis is typically the development of new theories which are able to provide more adequate solutions. A new paradigm emerges from the inquiries and controversies of the crisis state and with it another period of relative stability. (35)

In the case of invention, no less than four “new theories which [were] able to provide more adequate solutions” resulted from the “inquiries and controversies of the crisis state,” namely Classical Invention, Burke’s Dramatistic Method, Rohman’s Prewriting Method, and Pike’s Tagmemic Invention. Young portrays these new theories as moving composition away from tacit acceptance of current-traditional presuppositions towards the research of a new writing process paradigm. In his conclusion, Young calls for “studies of earlier rhetorical paradigms as paradigms, as systems composed of related beliefs, values, and methods” (46), fully committing himself to a reading of composition’s history as paradigmatic in a Kuhnian sense. This reading, taken in differing forms by Hairston and Bizzell and contested by Connors, led to paradigm debates which have deviated wildly from Kuhn’s original design.

Maxine Hairston: Paradigm as Object of Composition’s Development

Maxine Hairston also sees composition as a paradigmatic discipline, and agrees with Young that the field is shifting from a current-traditional paradigm to one based on writing process:

I believe that composition theorists and writing teachers can learn from Thomas Kuhn if they see his theory of scientific revolutions as an analogy that can illuminate developments that are taking place in our profession. Those developments, the most prominent of which is the move to a process-centered theory of teaching writing, indicates that our profession is probably in the first stages of a paradigm shift. (37)

While Young focuses primarily on the current-traditional paradigm’s neglect of invention, Hairston addresses its lack of rigorous, empirical research as a whole. Of primary importance is the realization “that the traditional paradigm did not grow out of research or experimentation”

(78). In other words, the current paradigm was based on tacit assumptions, prejudices, and the belief that “writing is a mysterious creative activity that cannot be categorized or analyzed” (78) and therefore cannot be taught⁴. Based on classical rhetoric but adjusted to fit literature professors’ vision of belles-lettres, current-traditional rhetoric

is a prescriptive and orderly view of the creative act, a view that defines the successful writer as one who can systematically produce a 500-word theme of five paragraphs, each with a topic sentence. Its proponents hold it a priori; they have not tested it against the composing processes of actual writers. (78)

Hairston argues that a paradigm not based on empirical research is doomed to fail. The growing awareness of new research encouraged a shift to a new paradigm, one based on such research and encouraged by social demands.

As extra-disciplinary empirical research on language, learning, and cognitive processes accumulated, many compositionists began to consider the implications of that research in their own practices. When compositionists began to conduct their own research on how real writers write, the “prescriptive and orderly” vision of the creative act began to fall apart. Writing was discovered to be recursive, not linear; an act of discovery as much as an act of transmittal; a process to be described, not a result to be prescribed. The real blows to the current-traditional paradigm came when returning veterans and, later, open admission students entered composition classrooms.⁵ No longer faced with the same problems, the tools of the current-traditional paradigm failed to work. In Kuhn’s words, “nature... somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science” (52).

⁴ Much as Newton’s theory of motion left gravity unexplained and presumably unexplainable.

⁵ As Kuhn puts it, “it is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well... In so far as their only recourse to [the] world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world” (111).

Because of the failure of current-traditional rhetoric in the newly diversified classroom, composition researchers such as Mina Shaughnessy, Janet Emig and Charles Stallard, and James Britton began to observe writers in the act of composing. Shaughnessy in particular shed light on the expectations set by current-traditional instruction and its tendency to cause more errors than it corrected (see Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*). Empirical research by Emig, Stallard, Berlin, and others helped build considerable evidence that writing is a cognitive process that can be observed, measured, and described. Thus, the “challenge to today’s community of composition and rhetoric scholars,” according to Hairston, is “to refine the new paradigm for teaching composition so that it provides a rewarding, productive, and feasible way of teaching writing” (88) based on research conducted on the habits of effective writers. Our exemplars, to use Kuhn’s term, should be found and researched in acts of effective writers.

Hairston’s argument, then, is that composition should become a science like those which Kuhn had analyzed. However, she seems to ignore Kuhn’s thesis that the natural sciences, despite their self-image as sources and storehouses of accumulative knowledge, are in fact “a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by non-cumulative breaks” (Kuhn, 208). Hairston’s adaptation of Young’s analogy is a strong rhetorical move towards portraying current-traditional rhetoric as a tradition-bound period riddled with inaccuracies, prejudices, and harmful tacit assumptions; but she fails to show how initiating a new tradition-bound period, equally paradigmatic and thus equally bound by paradigmatic myopia, would improve the status of composition studies in any way. If paradigms, as Kuhn describes them, are prescriptive worldviews based on rhetorical arguments, then to invoke any paradigm—whether based on tacit assumption or empirical research—is to fall into the same trap as we claim our predecessors have fallen into.

Furthermore, and ultimately more harmful to Hairston's argument, is that unlike the radical shifts in understanding which have occurred in the natural sciences, human sciences do not completely abandon past knowledge even when radically new knowledge is generated—old exemplars aren't thrown away to make room for new ones. This is because there is little, if any, complete revisioning on the level of *weltanschauung* in the human sciences. For example, psychoanalysis or Marxism do not theoretically invalidate previous modes or forms of psychology or economics as modern chemistry did alchemy or immunology did theories of demonic possession. Likewise, neither do new conceptions of psychology or economics eradicate the real possibility or the knowledge-generating value of Freud or Marx. On the “harder” end of the human sciences, such as is found in the more statistical, experimental, and empirical forms of sociology, trends and probabilities can be identified—usually to acute degrees and across generational and cultural divides. However, only rarely (and always temporarily) does a practitioner claim to have discovered an invariant ‘fact’ that changes our conception of humanity, human behavior, or human interaction. On the “softer” end of the human sciences, including most of philosophy, critical theory, and composition studies, there can be no claim of empirical finality, no invariant laws on which the actions of human subjects can be plotted like the trajectories of objects in space.

There is a significant difference between these probabilities and philosophies on the one side and scientific providence on the other. Simply put, people aren't particles. Returning to Kuhn's description of science, one sees that his concept of the paradigm describes certain disciplines which operate under a major assumption—namely, that physical phenomena operate under a fixed set of rules such that, once all influential variables are accounted for, are invariantly predictable. A gram of pure water at a set pressure will increase in temperature in a

perfectly predictable manner given the precise application of heat. The same understanding (which is the basis for paradigm-formation) applies to beams of light, objects moving in a gravitational field, chemical interaction, and so on. But a human subject, no matter how well defined (accounting for genetics, culture, personal history, medical background, nutrition, political disposition, and the near infinite physical, social, psychological, and situational variables which contribute to the individual-in-situation), cannot be thought of or treated in the same manner as these objects. I will return to this argument later in the attempt to show that the object of a field's study—and the assumptions that invariably follow—determines whether or not the field operates in a paradigmatic manner or in some other way.

Allegorical Paradigms

These objections aside, the narratives of Young and Hairston together make a compelling rhetorical argument for composition as discipline undergoing a paradigm shift. Current-traditional rhetoric⁶ does in fact limit the “worldview” of rhetoric and composition much as the Ptolemaic model of the solar system limited the worldview of astronomers (and of those who worked on problems based on Ptolemaic research, data, and theories). This analogy allowed writers like Young and Hairston to make their call for replacing current-traditional rhetoric with a writing process paradigm. If current-traditional rhetoric fails to address or absorb the problems facing the field, it must be replaced with a paradigm which can face those problems. If the idea of a writing process succeeds in addressing those problems, it should be developed and refined as our new paradigm.

Thus, as an allegory that helped describe and encourage the transition from current-traditional rhetoric to writing process theory, Kuhn's paradigm proved to be quite beneficial to

⁶ Which, much like Kuhn's paradigm-oriented communities, privileges and presupposes a “strong network of commitments – conceptual, theoretical, instrumental, and methodological” (42).

the field—especially given the institutional issues discussed by Yood. However, as useful and productive as the allegory was, not all theorists agreed that composition is analogous to the “normal sciences” Kuhn describes in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. By continuing to see composition as operating within or between paradigms, supporters of the paradigmatic schemes inevitably drew additional and inappropriate parallels between composition and the empirical sciences. Claiming that composition operates in a paradigmatic manner either presupposes that composition also operates in a positivistic manner or ignores that aspect of Kuhn’s argument. Making such a claim also ignores the fact that paradigmatic disciplines are so because they view the world in an acute, prescriptive way—one which is terribly difficult to see from outside of a paradigm. In other words, occupying a paradigm is not like occupying a politics or a philosophy from which one might still see, consider, and theorize other ways of thinking and doing. Considering these aspects of Kuhn’s study, Patricia Bizzell occupies an unusual position between those who argue for a composition paradigm and those who refute its possibility. But before discussing her argument, it is necessary to develop an understanding of Kuhn’s theory that goes beyond its rhetorical and allegorical value.

CHAPTER 2
A SHORT DETOUR INTO THE KUHNIAN SCIENCES

Kuhn's Sciences

It must be noted that Kuhn's exemplars are drawn almost exclusively from two closely related fields of science—physics and chemistry. This is significant because, given accurate data and complete conceptual frameworks, these sciences aim to describe phenomena with a mathematical precision that surpasses probability (p is always equal to 1). In other words, in any circumstance where sufficient data is available, the 'predictions' of physics and chemistry aren't predictions at all, they are certainties. Theory in these cases doesn't present probabilities or even descriptions in the normal sense of the term, it declares. As an example, let us imagine that we place a known quantity of pure iron in a hermetically sealed vacuum chamber which is maintained at a stable temperature. We then add specific quantities of oxygen and pure water. Physics and chemistry can describe, perfectly and in advance, exactly how much of the iron will convert to rust, at what rate, and for how long. There is no doubt, no possibility, that these numbers will change or vary in any way⁷. Thus, this is not an experiment at all, though it may have the trappings of one. It is simply a display—nothing is being tested and there are no variables, only quantities. If the numbers came out differently, in this case, it could only be due to human error—an incorrect quantity was added, an unexpected impurity made its way into the chamber, the wrong button was pushed on the calculator. Theory, in this case, is nothing of the sort.

Note the crucial qualification here: “given accurate data and complete conceptual frameworks” This is where the work of Kuhn's normal science comes in. My example in

⁷ Those familiar with quantum mechanics may object to this point, but Kuhn nonetheless overlooks the issue of quantum mechanic's statistical ontology.

the hermetically sealed vacuum chamber is, admittedly, ridiculously simple. Few phenomena in the laboratory, let alone in nature, are so pristinely isolated or so perfectly measured. However, the idea carries over. Given enough time to collect data and flesh out their conceptual frameworks, physics and chemistry are predicated on the idea that perfect prediction—certainty—is the only eventuality. This predicate is what makes the paradigmatic sciences paradigmatic. When a scientist's prediction fails (experimentally or observationally), the first response is to check instrumentation and observation: Are the tools calibrated properly? Did an unexpected variable creep in? Was the math done properly? If all these check out, and the unexpected results repeat themselves, then the scientist knows that there is at least one of two problems—either there is data in play which is not being accounted for or measured properly, or there is a gap in the conceptual (theoretical) framework being applied in this case.

The Practice of Science

Thus normal science operates, according to Kuhn, with scientists testing, finding data that were previously unaccounted for, perfecting or inventing measurements to better observe and record data, and both finding and filling in gaps in theories. As Kuhn describes, eventually a gap becomes so large—or many little gaps add up—that a crisis occurs, the theory is cast into doubt, and revolution begins to loom. We must take a step back, however. Physics and chemistry can strive for, and in many circumstances have already achieved, mathematical (not statistical or probabilistic) precision. That given current technology many variables are beyond accurate measurement is merely a historical fact—tools tend to get better. Thus, given our current state of understanding (better said, our current theories or conceptual frameworks of physics and chemistry), there are only two reasons why any given prediction in these fields will fail: a problem in the measurements or a problem in the theory. If the measurements are good (for example, if after 500 years of observation we are sure of the orbit of the planets) then there must

be something wrong with our theory (hence Einstein's reworking of gravitation). Thus a paradigm shift.

How is this different for other sciences such as psychology and sociology? There can never be, will never be, a probability that equals one—though in many cases p may get so close as to not matter inside or outside of the laboratory. If prediction in these cases is all but certain, can we not say that there is no significant difference? The answer depends on context. For the average person, there is no difference; though by the same token, the average person isn't affected by or subject to Kuhnian paradigm shifts. For science, and those enmeshed in its operation, the difference is fundamentally important, though it should be noted that it is unlikely that the average scientist thinks of it much (why should a sociologist be worrying about the differences between sociological probabilities and physical predictions anyway? Those are *philosophical* questions, not empirical ones.). This is where the psychology of scientists comes into play. Scientists in fields which have no claim to mathematical precision, such as biology, often talk as if they did. In other words, the biologist studying migration patterns does not speak in terms of probabilities, particularly not when addressing the public, and for good reason: prose littered with probabilities is painful to read and casts unnecessary doubt on predictions that are, for all intents and purposes outside of the philosophy of science, certainties. Though this scientist will carefully note his findings in statistical form when publishing a paper, his address to journalists will be absolute—"We discovered that this phenomena works this way"—implying a mathematical certainty that simply doesn't exist⁸.

⁸ Note that the (somewhat artificial) divisions between (and within) the sciences makes this issue particularly difficult at times. A biologist can say, with 100% certainty, that an animal deprived of food and water will die (this is not a matter of biology – it is a matter of thermodynamics – though it can be described in biological terms). This same biologist cannot, however, describe most other phenomena with such accuracy. Nearly everything else currently under the aegis of

My argument, then, is that paradigms can only operate as Kuhn described them when a scientist (or more accurately, a community of scientists) is working with a theory that does not operate probabilistically (though instrumental limitations may force the scientists to speak probabilistically). Unless the problem is reducible to physics and chemistry, for which probabilities are only shortcomings in data collection or conceptual framework, there is no recourse to statements along the lines of “Reality works in this exact way.” At best, these ‘soft’ sciences can only claim that “this particular aspect of reality tends to operate this way in these particular circumstances”—a difference for which no advanced degree is needed to be understood. One last comparative example should make this clear. When a physicist encounters a fundamental problem—say, the question of how gravity can apparently move faster than the speed of light (see Kuhn and Greene)—he realizes that there is something wrong with either his description of gravity or his description of the maximum velocity. In this case, this means that there is something wrong with his conception of reality itself. The universe does not operate the way his models tell him it should, even though those models seem to describe most phenomenon. When Einstein developed his theories regarding this problem, those theories did more than correct shortcomings in earlier models or even replace earlier models—they described the universe in an entirely new way that changed every assumption, all related models, and opened a window onto areas of physical reality that, as far as our scientist was concerned, didn’t exist prior to Einstein. The original theory, which was supposed to but failed to be a 1:1 analogy of

biology can only be expressed probabilistically. Perhaps given perfect tools the time of death of our starving animal and other biological phenomena could be predicted perfectly, but such would no longer be biology proper, they would be fully described and approached through the tools of chemistry and physics. Taking a few more steps away from physics and chemistry, say towards sociology, and probability becomes not only more prevalent in the literature but fundamental to the very activity of the discipline, thus making it impossible for scientists involved to expect perfection or develop a theory for which crisis and revolution in Kuhnian terms are possibilities.

reality, was replaced with a new theory which is closer to the ideal, possible, but probably still distant 1:1 'perfect' theory.

Now consider the marine biologist who discovers life below the thermocline in the deep sea trenches . Where biology prior to this moment thought life unlikely to dwell in such an inhospitable place (near zero light, extremely high pressure, vast differences in temperature between the areas immediately surrounding volcanic trenches and areas only a few feet away, etc), our biologist found not only life but a fully developed, teeming ecology. The science that sprung from these waters was revelatory—not only did the existence of these ecologies prove that life is much hardier and diverse than we once believed and that complex food chains can be based on chemosynthesis, but extended studies have shown (with very high probability) that these vents are the origin of life, thus beating out the questionable theory that life started in shallow pools. But is such a moment revolutionary? Did it lead to a paradigm shift? And more importantly, is any such moment in the history of modern biology revolutionary, in the same manner that Einstein's contribution was revolutionary? Not likely. While this discovery opened many doors of inquiry and shifted many theories (particularly in evolutionary science, exobiology, and the study of extremophiles), it only added to the science, it did not change it. The vast majority of biologists, even in closely related research programs, did not change their methods, important assumptions, or fundamental beliefs about how biology, let alone reality on a fundamental level, operates.

Like the cultural anthropologist who finds a society that lives in a novel manner, our marine biologist found an interesting set of phenomena that expanded our understanding of what's out there and what forms of expression are possible, but nothing that changed biology, let alone any notion of science on an operational or conceptual level.

The idea of scientific paradigms is based on two important activities: describing the work done in scientific communities and explaining the educational apparatus through which students become members of said communities. We can see immediately why such a structure appeals to compositionists: we need only replace the term ‘work’ with ‘writing’ and remove the term ‘scientific’ (or define it broadly) to come to a definition of our own field of study (with which, I venture to suggest, most of us will feel comfortable). Tinkering with such low-level definitions, however, has drastic effects as we move upwards. For Kuhn

‘Normal science’ means research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice. Today, such achievements are recounted, though seldom in their original form, by science textbooks... Before such books became popular... many of the famous classics of science fulfilled a similar function. Aristotle’s *Physica*, Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, Newton’s *Principia*... these and many other works served for a time to define the legitimate problems and methods of a research field for succeeding generations of practitioners. (10)

Thus the base picture: professionals engaged in an activity (in this case, normal science) defined by specific achievements which form the basis of an educational literature. Again, we can see what appear to be parallels: rhetoricians and compositionists engage in research, educate and are educated, have textbooks and a cannon of classics (Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Cicero’s *De Inventione* and *De Oratore*, Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, not to mention modern contributors such as Toulmin and Burke and indirect sources from other fields such as literature, critical theory, linguistics, and cultural studies). The question is whether these parallels are theoretically significant (deep) or merely cosmetic (shallow). Kuhn goes on to explain how paradigmatic canons play in scientific fields:

[these texts] were able to do so [“define the legitimate problems and methods of a research field for succeeding generations of practitioners”] because they shared two essential characteristics. Their achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. Simultaneously, it was sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve. (10)

The Pedagogy of Science

Here is where we must pause and consider the content of the books themselves. Certainly, we can say of many a book of rhetoric that its “achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents.” Aristotle is still read by compositionists today—and not just for the history or philosophy for which a scientist may read Newton. Indeed, Cicero, Quintilian, Toulmin, and Burke have lost no status in our curriculum⁹. But that is part of the problem in comparing composition’s work to that of normal science. In Kuhn’s picture of science, foundational works and the foundations they lay are eventually overwritten—when the paradigm ‘shifts’ it takes its canon with it. The theories are not simply updated or amended; they are not incorporated into an evolving canon but struck from the record of current scientific concerns altogether (or, as Kuhn points out, revised in the textbooks so as to seem cumulative). Their value to science becomes strictly historical, which is not relevant to the overwhelmingly practical work and mindset of the professional scientist.

This punctuated equilibrium is not the case in the humanities. Unlike Ptolemy’s geocentric solar system, Aristotle’s theories of rhetoric have not been abandoned for better, more accurate, more precise models. It continues to be updated and amended, incorporated and reincorporated into the evolving canon, and compared to newer ideas and frameworks. Indeed, it seems impossible to imagine a scenario where a ‘new theory of rhetoric’ could be so successful that Aristotle would be rewritten as a historical misstep in the development of ‘the one true rhetoric’ (one wonders how such success would be measured in any case). This is not to say that Aristotle’s body of work in the humanities is above criticism (far from it); it is to say that work

⁹ Some come and go, but none are erased. Unlike the astronomer who would be laughed at for basing his current work on Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, we have the privilege of a canon that only expands – no one would laugh at a compositionist for reexamining the rhetoric of St. Augustine in a modern context.

in the humanities operates according to a different rubric than that of the sciences. To use Kuhn's terminology, science is not cumulative; the humanities, by definition, are—we don't abandon Aristotle because we have realized that many of his ideas are sexist¹⁰. Instead, we modify and amend his work, and we can continue to do so indefinitely. In science, according to Kuhn, indefinite modification is not possible: if you bend the trunk of a theory enough, the tree will eventually break. This is because scientific theories are teleologies—there is no bricolage across scientific paradigms.

I will return to this subject repeatedly throughout this discussion. For the time being, I must return to the second part of Kuhn's description of texts, namely his statements that “these and many other works served for a time to define the legitimate problems and methods of a research field for succeeding generations of practitioners” and that they were “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (10). Immediately a difference is evident between paradigmatic sciences and the humanities. While it seems simple enough to define a ‘legitimate problem’ in the sciences (How is disease X spread between populations? How does an object's gravity well affect the trajectories of near-by objects?), the very concept of a legitimate problem in the humanities is troublesome. All aspects of human thought, activity, and interaction are legitimate—to suggest otherwise is likely to get one thrown out of the building. There are certainly problems that, compared to others, can be described as more pressing, immediate, or even universal, but there is no such thing as an illegitimate problem in the humanities. (Let us be careful how we define illegitimate here: in the

¹⁰ We also use the present tense to describe his statements, an acknowledgement that we are still in dialog with those that came before us. Science only uses the present tense when describing a method (as in an experimental procedure), and then only as a grammatical convention to minimize confusion (e.g., so that the reader can more easily identify which step came first, second, and so on).

sciences, illegitimate means illogical, irrational, or irrelevant—quackery or pseudo-science at best, schizophrenic bunk at worst; in the humanities, illegitimate could only be a synonym for unethical—a study supporting sexism or discrimination, for example, or a perhaps case of plagiarism. Even the most extreme “outlier” in the field of human studies is still legitimate in the sense that no study in the humanities is measurable by the paradigmatic standards of any given science.)

The second most immediate problem is the idea that paradigms are based on achievements that are “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve.” Surely our exemplars are open-ended, and we have an endless array of problems to consider, but are the problems of the humanities the same as the problems of the sciences? Kuhn describes scientific problems as puzzles—riddles which, while their solution might bear on the big picture, are independent and self-contained. To put it in scientific terms, puzzles are sets, there is a limited number of variables and a limited range of values for any given variable. This is not parallel to the situation in the humanities, however. People, by which I mean individuals, are not puzzles, and to the extent that we may seem to ‘solve a puzzle’ we cannot imagine that we’ve reached any sort of final word regarding the individual in question or individuals in general. Within the specific field of composition studies, we may find a way to ‘reach’ a certain student, or to help a student overcome a particular writing problem, or even a pedagogical method that seems to work well overall, but we cannot claim to have solved anything in the scientific sense meant by Kuhn. The next student, no matter how similar, has his or her own set of concerns (I refuse to use the word ‘problems’); the next classroom has its own particular dynamic; the next theory has its own rubric. All oxygen atoms share the same

definition; they will all and always react the same way in a given set of circumstances. Nowhere will we ever find two students who do.

But the faulty parallelism does not end there. Let us return to the issue of educating educators.

Kuhn describes the role of textbooks as the transmission of paradigms: “The study of paradigms... is what mainly prepares the student for membership in the particular scientific community with which he will later practice” (11). Again, a familiar concept. Do we not study theoretical frameworks—Marxism, post-colonial studies, process-oriented pedagogy, and so on? Does calling process-oriented pedagogy a “theoretical framework” make it differ from a Kuhnian paradigm? To repeat Yood’s question, “Is being ‘post’ paradigmatic?” Kuhn’s next few sentences begin to flesh out the answer:

Because [the student of science] there joins men [sic] who learned the bases of their field from the same concrete models, his subsequent practice will seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals. Men whose research is based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice. That commitment and the apparent consensus it produces are prerequisites for normal science, i.e., for the genesis and continuation of a particular research tradition. (11)

A student trained in the humanities, even one whose work and research closely follows that of a mentor in the same department, does not have the same claim to “concrete models” or commitment “to the same rules and standards” that a student joining a scientific paradigm does. While practitioners in both the sciences and the humanities engage in what they respectively call “interpretation,” and there are constructs referred to as rules and standards in both realms, we must ask what is meant in each case by “interpretation” and by “rules and standards.” Our standards—rules if you will—in the humanities are primarily ethical. Especially now that post-theories have come to dominate the field, our concerns are not with methodology or epistemology so much as with fair play and the proper treatment of others. Our interpretations,

even when conducted in close proximity to the interpretations of others, are not based on rules but on rhetoric, not on concrete science but on contemplative subjectivity.

To give a more specific example, two Marxists trained in the same department, even if they have read the same books, in the same order, under the guidance of the same professor, can interpret the same phenomenon differently (the same can be said of students trained in any of the humanities' theoretical frameworks). There is no step-by-step rubric, no invariant Kuhnian fundamentals to guide them to the same, inflexible interpretation¹¹. One student may find issues of gender to be as fundamental to the concerns of Marxism as class status, the other may accept feminist principles as a going concern but not as a theoretical 'variable' in a specific case. To say that the former is a Marxist-feminist and the latter a traditional Marxist is splitting a subjective hair that doesn't exist in science: one cannot be a Newtonian-Relativistic physicist—scientific paradigms are always incompatible. Conversely, if we were to take two physics students, no matter what departments they were trained in, both would agree that the speed of light is a constant ($c = 299,792,458$ meters per second). In any problem involving c , the students would use the same measurement, time and again, as well as the same formulas. Indeed, if one of our physics students used a different number, say because he felt that the fixed speed of light represented an unethical marginalization of other speeds in the universe, his career in physics would be over.

¹¹ Again we encounter differences between the definition of words in science and in the humanities. Validity, which in the humanities' logic means a proposition which is true because its premises are true, does not mean the same thing in science: "a measurement which accurately measures what it claims to measure." Likewise, reliability, the case in point in my example of the Marxist students, is paramount in science but of little consequence in the humanities – at least in terms of dismissing works as quackery. For a scientist who has presented an argument (i.e., tested a hypothesis empirically), the primary question in mind when publishing the result is "will my fellow scientists be able to replicate – and thus prove reliable – my results?" In the humanities we hope for consensus or concession, readings are never repeatable in the way experiments are, nor is there a need for them to be.

If the term ‘science’ describes the process and product of several related knowledge-generating disciplines—and if one of our primary questions as compositionists is “What sort of knowledge-generating discipline are we?”—then it is no surprise that we have considered, questioned, and even absconded with some of the methodology, terminology, and philosophy of science. The question is whether or not our discipline operates in the same way as the sciences Kuhn describes.¹² Kuhn shows us that revolutions—narrowly defined as shifts from one understanding of reality to another—happen in science. Though he compares these scientific revolutions to political revolutions (which only adds to the rhetorical value of paradigm-talk in composition studies), this analogy is limited. Citizens in a post-revolution state continue to use the same language, they pick and choose¹³ what changes to make to the law, to currency, to history, and so on. Scientists in a post-revolution discipline do not continue to use the same language: ‘space’ and ‘time’ had respective meanings in pre-relativist physics; they have been replaced by ‘space-time’ in post-relativistic physics. In fields where Einsteinian dynamics is the reigning paradigm, there is no physicist who fails in tacitly understanding time and space as constituents of an indivisible whole (we could even define a physicist as someone who has internalized this counterintuitive understanding).

Furthermore, this understanding is so far removed from the layperson’s understanding that it constitutes a separate metaphysic: the layperson’s ‘physical reality’ is predicated on a lifetime (and a shared history) lived at earthly speeds where relativistic understandings of speed, time, space, and gravitation defy common sense. Conversely, we can, living in a western democracy, learn the Russian socialist worldview without abandoning our own. Such is the daily work of

¹² I must point out here that many fields popularly construed as science – taxonomy, most of medicine, psychology and sociology – are not paradigmatic sciences.

¹³ That this picking and choosing is done as a group, often unconsciously or, at least, without deliberate philosophizing, is irrelevant to the present discussion.

historians, philosophers, political scientists, and biographers. But we cannot become physicists in an Einsteinian paradigm without abandoning the Newtonian universe¹⁴. Similar differences can be enumerated regarding any of these analogic points: political laws compared to scientific laws (rules vs. laws, c.f. Kuhn's *Postscript*), national currency to scientific currency (i.e., variables, particles, objects), human history to scientific history (as discussed at length by Kuhn; indeed, Kuhn's strongest claim is that what makes science unique and paradigmatic is to be found in the unique conventions, conversions, and exemplars of science textbooks). There is no 'exchange rate' or translation in science, no recognition of different cultures or states. That is why, in Kuhn's system, science can only change through worldview-changing revolutions.

A Paradigmatic Composition or A Composed Paradigm?

Can anything parallel to a Kuhnian revolution occur in composition studies? There are several possible candidates, both considered by several of the scholars I have discussed. First is the shift in object pointed out by Hairston and Young, from product to process; second is the shift in subject, as described by Mina Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations*, from the prepared students of the past to the often unprepared students entering the university in the 60s and 70s. In either case, there is no evidence of an exemplar which defines and limits the field, no ontological framework which limits what we can reasonably expect to find, or any degree of consensus on the level that Kuhn's work reveals in the physical sciences. We realized, as Young and Hairston point out, that current-traditional pedagogy—forcing our students to model canonical works, ignoring invention, revision, and the like—was an inefficient program at the first-year level. There is no sensible way, however, to compare this to the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric solar system. Certainly the product of writing is an important element in any

¹⁴ Hence the trouble many philosophers of science, such as Peter Godfrey-Smith, have with Kuhn's assertion that post-revolution scientists are transported to a new world in the literal sense (C.f. Kuhn *Ch. X*).

writing classroom, especially in advanced classes, and there can be no doubt that in advanced classes and in cases of many successful writers modeling plays a major role in the writing process. Unlike post-Galilean astronomers, we did not and can not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Which leads to the issue of exemplars and the need to analyze Kuhn's description of scientific or paradigmatic exemplars more closely. In Kuhnian science, exemplars are everything: they limit the field, frame the worldview, constitute the small set of activities that are accepted as scientific, and form the core of education. For reasons I discussed above, Kuhn's exemplars are drawn from the hardest of the physical sciences: physics and chemistry. Close comparison reveals that there are no Kuhnian exemplars in composition¹⁵. It is true that literary works are exemplary and often used in the classroom. And samples of student and real world writing can and do serve as powerful examples (the high sales of readers is proof enough of that, with or without empirical scrutiny). But nowhere is to be found one particulate (oxygen, genes), one specific process (chemical separation, selective breeding), one model (periodic table of elements, genetics) which any compositionist—let alone a generation—believes is 'right' in the scientific sense, or that overwrites all others. Composition instructors are continually confronted with new issues: technologically, email and interactive classrooms, Wikipedia and online plagiarism; pedagogically, Shaughnessy's *Errors* and Freire's *Oppressed*, let alone the hundreds of individuals we meet and claim to teach every year; theoretically, Kuhn's Paradigm,

¹⁵ Nor are there in most other human sciences. For the sake of illustration and argument, a short list: great artists serve as the basis for artistic studies, no artist's work defines art; laws and legal rulings are limited in scope and effect by time, geography, and the rulings of other courts; psychology is descriptive, culturally embedded, and provisional (c.f. the endless revisions of the *DSM*; compare to the *ICD*); history and literary studies have abandoned grand narratives. Furthermore, it should go without saying that each of these fields, and the many others which I did not list, are at any time made up of many schools defined by arbitrary, local, historical, and ultimately interchangeable choices.

Kent's Post-Process, Burke's Pentad, the endless pages of the *JAC* and *CCC*; institutionally, the constant battles over funding, politics in the classroom, the status and stature of writing programs, their relationship with other departments—I could expand this list indefinitely. Where in this vast field do we locate our oxygen, our guiding theory? Even Aristotle is equally used and ridiculed as the individual scholar or pedagogue sees fit. But more importantly, Aristotle's rhetoric can be used piecemeal, when doing so serves our purposes, or combined with Toulmin, or ignored completely. Such cannot be done in the physics classroom with the likes of Einstein.

CHAPTER 3
PARADIGMS, PARADIGMS EVERYWHERE

The Question of Paradigms, 1978-1983: Part Two

Patricia Bizzell: Paradigms as Subject of Composition's Inquiry

Responding to Maxine Hairston's 1978 address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication,¹⁶ Patricia Bizzell argues strongly against the privileging of empiricism in the new composition paradigm. According to Bizzell's reading of Kuhn, paradigms come before evidence: each paradigm's methodology leads to particular "facts" and forces particular interpretations of those facts: "a paradigm is established, even in the natural sciences, not because of compelling empirical evidence, but because of a rhetorical process that delimits the shared language of the intellectual community governed by the paradigm" (764). From within one scientific paradigm there is no language which can conceive or speak of other scientific paradigms and thus no possibility of formulating evidence that can be used to establish or argue for a new paradigm.

From this reading of Kuhn, Bizzell argues that empiricists such as Hairston advocate an empirical paradigm because of scientific fetishism, the "misapprehension that only a paradigm so established can raise English studies to the status of a truly rigorous discipline" (764). Those who make a fetish of scientism have engaged a backwards reading of Kuhn.¹⁷ Bizzell points out that

¹⁶ In which Hairston first argued for the empirical paradigm she describes in "The Winds of Change".

¹⁷ As I will show later, on this point Robert Connors is in full agreement with Bizzell: Although, as we have seen, Kuhn's theory of paradigms and revolutions was meant specifically to refute the logical-positivist theory of science as constantly accumulating neutral knowledge, in practice Kuhnian disciples in non-scientific fields have tended to *promote* positivism within their own disciplines. This has led, in non-scientific fields, to mountains of sterile data, an atmosphere of anxious caution and methodological backbiting, and no end of new problems cropping up for each old one solved. (Connors 18, original emphasis included)

Kuhn based his theory of scientific paradigm shifts on the abrupt changes which occur in the humanities. Furthermore, Bizzell's Kuhn argues that science does not "examine nature directly and discover its truth" (765) despite its claims of positivist empiricism. In fact, "his historiography of science has been controversial in his own field [the philosophy of science] precisely because he questions its traditional view of science as a discipline that progresses ever closer to accurate description and prediction of the phenomenon of reality" (765).

Bizzell argues against importing and imposing an empirical paradigm on English studies because empiricism is the sole method of the natural sciences. An empirical composition would cease to be composition at all—it would become a subset of hard psychology, sociology, or linguistics. Bizzell demands a closer reading of Kuhn which will reveal that empiricism is incompatible with and even antithetical to the goals of composition. According this reading, a scientific community's paradigm is the tacit, foundational network of ideology, methodology, and terminology on which its understanding of the world is based. Experiments, observations, interpretations, theories, and all other constructs of the scientist's trade are based on the belief that that the world exists in a certain way and is populated by certain phenomena which operate in a certain manner. For the natural sciences, unlike in the human sciences or the sciences of philosophy or politics, nature can only exist in one way. The earth is either flat or it is round. Occupying one or the other worldview has fundamental effects on what can and cannot be real, done, or seen in the world. In other words, what distinguishes the natural sciences from other realms of inquiry is its belief in the stable laws of a measurable, predictable reality. Pre-paradigmatic studies of nature propose various, often conflicting explanations of phenomena which lead to unreliable prediction and limited application. A Kuhnian paradigm is established when certain phenomena become facts, fixed objects operating under fixed laws.

Using Newton as an example, we can say that his operational definition of gravity allowed for reliable prediction and wide application. This theorization of gravity was so effective that the entire community of physicists was taken hold of by its paradigm, which, while much more successful than pre-paradigmatic theories, also narrowed that community's ability to see gravity in any other way. Gravity became what Newton's laws said it was. Reality, in turn, became exactly that reality which could accommodate Newton's understanding of gravitational force. Because gravity was "known" to exist in a certain way, it was measured in ways that presupposed that particular existence—no instruments or theories existed that allowed it to be seen in a different way. Conceiving of alternative definitions or qualities of gravity,¹⁸ as a philosopher may conceive of an alternative political system, was impossible because gravity was seen and measured based on its (pre)conception. Bizzell's reading of Kuhn thus reiterates his argument that empirical evidence is predetermined by the observer's paradigm and therefore cannot be used to argue for the validity of one's observational methods. More to the point, Bizzell's reading shows the incompatibility of paradigmatic thinking with human subjects. Even the most empirically-oriented compositionist wouldn't equate a theory of human composition with a theory of falling apples.

Based on this difference between the natural sciences and the humanities, Bizzell argues against Hairston's call for importation of empiricism's methods. However, Bizzell still proposes that composition is paradigmatic, albeit in its own way. In her view, composition circa 1979 is in the "unsettled condition" indicative of a paradigm shift, moving away from the attempt to operate as Kuhn's "normal science" operates and towards operating as Kuhn himself operated,

¹⁸ E.g., Einstein's formulation of gravity as the curvature of space-time in response to the presence of mass. For an elegant and accessible telling of the dramatic shift from Newton's to Einstein's gravity, see Brian Greene's *The Elegant Universe*.

seeking “insight into the ways ideas shape our lives as our lives shape our ideas” (786). English studies is particularly well suited to investigating how the members of a community are bound by their shared language to a paradigm and how languages change as paradigms do. If “the language of the paradigm is the substance of the paradigm” and if “the sudden failure of familiar language to unite the community often initiates a paradigm shift” (767) then the study of languages—the province of English studies—should be the study of paradigms, paradigmatic operation, and paradigm shifts (which does not necessarily imply that all disciplines or social groups are paradigm-based in the Kuhnian sense).

For Bizzell the “unsettled condition” of composition studies is the violent meeting between opposing camps. On one side of the battle is a composition which views the world of language as “a system of references to a knowable reality external to it” (768). On the other side, the one which Bizzell advocates, is a composition which views “language as the product of a community... as social product and embodiment of ideology” (768). The former suffers from the same paradigmatic blinders which all empirical-scientific communities suffer from. The latter, Bizzell hopes, “will generate research into our processes of self-consciousness about language” (771). This research will reveal the plurality of communicative paradigms, making accessible an “ethos of academic discourse” and allowing us to “cease to make the insulting claim that a badly argued essay contravenes universal standards of rationality verified by simple inspection of the natural order” (770).

However, it is not clear how Bizzell’s re-conceptualization of English studies will constitute a paradigm in any of Kuhn’s uses of the term. Either composition is paradigmatic—which for Kuhn would require the very positivistic empiricism which Bizzell opposes—or composition is non-paradigmatic, engaging in the same sociological study which Kuhn himself

engaged in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Bizzell states that “historians of and within English studies and other humanistic disciplines *are already guided by a paradigm which Kuhn finds superior to the dominant one in the history of science*” (766, emphasis mine). However, it is not certain that Kuhn claims “humanistic disciplines are already guided by a paradigm” so much as he claims that individual scientific communities, like individual humanistic disciplines, “advance not by quantitative accumulation of knowledge but rather by a series of qualitative leaps over gulfs of incommensurability” (Connors 2). Cultural changes and scientific changes may exhibit interesting parallels but also substantial differences which lead to differences in community formation, change, and exchange. Bizzell’s statement confounds the notion of a paradigm as a specific community’s current worldview¹⁹ with the very notion Kuhn sought to refute: the idea that any community’s methodology and epistemology are permanent, if gradually improving, fixtures (i.e., that which would exist if science had one “dominant” paradigm in the timeless sense Bizzell implies above).

Reappraising the Allegory

Thus far I have discussed three writers who have applied Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigms to composition. Richard Young’s use of the term is primarily analogical: drawing few direct correspondences to the normal sciences on which Kuhn’s work is based, he sees Kuhnian paradigm shifts as an illuminating parallel to composition’s move from current-traditional rhetoric to writing process rhetoric. His use of Kuhn’s work serves as a rhetorical trope to illustrate the shift he describes, but he does not necessarily claim that the humanities operate in the same manner as the natural sciences. Maxine Hairston, while citing Young extensively, goes

¹⁹ I.e., the paradigm of modern astrophysicists (who perceive space-time as a matrix in which curvature caused by the presence of mass accounts for what we perceive as gravity) as opposed to the paradigm of their predecessors (who saw space and time as distinct, flat, linear, and unrelated to the causes or effects of gravity).

beyond his analogy to a direct adaptation: composition is not only paradigmatic in that it is undergoing a shift from a pre-paradigmatic state to a fully paradigmatic one, but should officially and enthusiastically adopt the empirical methods of the natural sciences to ensure its professional, pedagogical, and political position. Finally, Patricia Bizzell also sees composition as undergoing a paradigm shift, but for Bizzell this shift is from a crisis state of competing methodologies (the worst of which is empiricism) towards a meta-paradigmatic position from which it will study all language-paradigm communities. By drawing incomplete or untenable parallels between composition and Kuhn's paradigmatic communities, each of these writers epistemologically conflates scientific and humanistic inquiry. In his 1983 article, "Composition Studies and Science", Robert Connors considers the ramifications of attempting "to cross the invisible but potent line separating the humanities from the sciences" (1).

Robert Connors: Paradigms as Problematic

Connors gives credit to Hairston for accurately portraying Kuhn's theory as it concerns paradigm shifts. However, Connors sees the application of Kuhnian paradigms to non-scientific disciplines as a "yearning toward the power and success of the natural sciences" (4) more than as an accurate description of changes in those fields:

The quotation of dicta from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a popular and growing trend in our discipline, and there is a powerful, if usually unexpressed, agenda in such free borrowing of terms from Kuhn. The tacit message of all of this borrowing is that composition studies should be a scientific or pre-scientific discipline. (5)

For Connors the goal of such a message is wrought with problems, a sentiment shared by biologist John Gary Tallman: "Scholars within the humanities have a tendency to appropriate the models and methodologies of science with little regard to the epistemology behind them within empirical research" (Tallman, as quoted in Connors 6). The epistemology behind science is

based on at least five axioms which do not apply well or at all to composition studies and pedagogy.

According to Connors' research, the first goal of scientific inquiry is to develop descriptive, explanatory, and (ultimately) predictive power. While these terms may appear in the literature of composition, they are used in ways distinct from those of the natural sciences. Description and explanation in the sciences are absolute—during periods of normal science between paradigm shifts, phenomena and the laws that govern them are fixed, their natures and operations beyond debate. In composition, description and explanation are always situational, contextual, and subject to change. Indeed, our operational definitions, theories, and methods are always open to debate. Prediction itself is an impossibility in human-based sciences, as Connors' lengthy description of psychology's epistemology reveals. Although this distinction alone is enough to show that composition is far from scientific, Connors' review of the literature shows that the discipline as a whole does not parallel any of the remaining axioms of science. The vast majority of published articles in the field “seldom if ever exhibit naturalist metaphysics or genuinely empiricist epistemology; few have falsifiable hypothesis, and they certainly do not culminate in any scientific (or non-scientific) sense” (8).

Those few articles which seem scientific enough to be deemed “descriptive and experimental” may show some descriptive and explanatory power but “have not yet been able, in Kuhn's terms, to transform the problems that the discipline faces into normal-science puzzles” (8). Composition researchers have not been able to establish a Kuhnian paradigm; there exists no set terminology, methodology, or ideology on which to base the entirety of composition research. In fact, despite the 23 years that have passed since Connors “Composition Studies and Science” was published, a casual review of available textbooks published in that time—the medium

through which Kuhn believes paradigms propagate themselves—shows that there are as many ‘theories’ and combinations of theories as there are texts. Unlike physicists or chemists, writers trained in different institutions (or even different classrooms within the same institution) do not acquire the same “strong network of commitments” and overwhelming worldview indicative of a paradigm. Researchers and scholars of writing share an even less unified view.

Connors blames this confusion on misuse of Kuhn’s term. Kuhn’s “paradigm” included two ideas: the structure of a “disciplinary matrix”²⁰ and the existence of “exemplars.” Young, Hairston, and Bizzell use the term exclusively to mean the former. As these three writers have argued, paradigmatic communities have singular theories based on singular worldviews. However, those singular theories are inseparable from the exemplars they are based on, the “concrete puzzle solutions which, employed as models or exemplars, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science” (Kuhn 175, quoted by Connors 9). Without exemplars on which to base a “normal science,” composition is missing the most crucial element of Kuhn’s paradigmatic disciplines. Indeed, the abandonment of anything resembling an exemplar—the urtexts of the so-called “product paradigm”—is what the entire process movement is predicated on.

Thus Richard Young’s four theories of invention can be read in one of two ways. First, as indicative of a paradigm in crisis in which four (and possibly more) theories are compared until one achieves success as most descriptive of the world. If this is the case, empirical research will narrow the selection of useful theories until we are left with one successful theory with the power to predict and correct problems in our field (i.e., it becomes an exemplar). As even the most cursory review of textbooks will show, not only has the field not been narrowed in this way but

²⁰ As described above and in the works of Young, Hairston, and Bizzell.

theories (models, exemplars) of invention—including many holdovers from current-traditional rhetoric—are more numerous today than in any previous era.

The second reading of Young's four theories is as 'proof' that composition is non-paradigmatic. Most composition instructors will agree (as our textbook review would) that for certain students in certain situations Burke's dramatic approach serves invention, while for others Pike's tagmemic approach is the key. Indeed, many composition instructors ignore the issue of invention entirely—a situation which, considering gravity as a case in point, would never be the case in a physics classroom. In other words, composition possesses no exemplar which serves as the "basis for the solution" for any of our problems even if we could claim to share a set of well-defined problems. If composition were paradigmatic—if it assumed one world operating under one set of laws—two theories of invention could not stand side by side, just as the earth cannot be simultaneously both round and flat.

Ultimately, Connors argues, human subjects cannot be studied as physical objects can. Even when such studies are attempted (as in psychology) their results cannot serve as the basis for truth-statements in the manner of laws derived from studies of physical phenomena. It is impossible to conduct research on human beings in such a way as to extrapolate universal laws of nature:

At the heart of the physical-science experiment is the assumption that certain elements of the subject can be chosen, disembedded from their naturally-occurring context, and manipulated, and that the resultant changes can be ordered to a formal system of measurement. The classic experimental model has not, however, resulted in much genuinely cumulative knowledge when applied to human processes. This lack of cumulation is due primarily to the complexity and interdependence of mental processes, which make such disembedding of discrete phenomena difficult and tend to make experimental conclusions in psychology isolated and sterile²¹. (Connors 12)

²¹ As the debate between behaviorist and cognitive psychology, which plays out in every introductory psychology textbook, makes clear.

The vast number of variables, multiplied across an equally vast number of interconnections, contextual effects, and individual idiosyncrasies, makes the possibility of human cognitive measurement on a macro level nonexistent. At best, general patterns can be determined, such as the typical effects of specific distractions on particular memory tasks assuming all other variables are equal.²² How memory itself (assuming it is a singular construct) plays into an activity as painfully complex as the writing process, let alone how it is affected by distraction and other variables, is far beyond psychology's ability to measure route memorization in domesticated pigeons.²³

If the human sciences cannot hold claim to the definitive empirical research and fundamental law-writing of the paradigmatic natural sciences, why have compositionists engaged in so much “paradigm-talk”? Connors describes two interrelated reasons. First is the allure of the power and respect held by the natural sciences. The ability to “prove” that the world works a certain way and to see industrial complexes, economic markets, social and political changes arise from that proof is “powerfully attractive” (to use Connors' phrase), especially when one has funding proposals in mind. Second is composition's insecurity as a discipline. The history of composition's knowledge has been “chaotic, anti-empirical, confused, and at times mindless” (18). The need to justify the discipline—to English departments, to the academy, and to the grantors of funding—let alone the need to feel confident in front of a classroom of students—is emotionally fulfilled by assuming the walk and talk of the confident scientist.

²² While awkward, my sentence is intentionally constructed to show the necessary hedging of experimental results in psychology.

²³ Indeed, even the most empirically oriented and reliable psychological approach, behavioral psychology, is so limited in its explanatory power compared to physics or chemistry that Connors describes it as tending “to have the character of an applied technology like metallurgy rather than that of a true theoretical science” (15).

If composition could reach the status of a fully empirical, positivistic science fully vested with the ethos necessary to describe and dictate its corner of reality, its practitioners and researchers would enjoy the power and security familiar to engineers and physicists. Such power and security would certainly be comforting. However, as Connors has shown, composition cannot achieve either—at least not by assuming an impossibly empiricist paradigm. Furthermore, the push for paradigmatic scientism will cause more damage than it mends: “the push towards science in our field... can lead all too easily to scientism, placing methodology at the heart of rhetorical education and tilting composition studies toward the sort of mechanistic concerns with neutral ‘techniques’ that we wish in our best moments to transcend” (19). Attempting to treat writing subjects as we would clockwork machines dehumanizes the writer; attempting to describe writing processes as we would predictable physical processes devalues the writing process.

Connors does not, however, argue for the dismissal of all empirical research. In fact, he sees it as valuable and necessary: “Whatever question advances knowledge is worth asking... I distrust our unexamined tendency towards positivism, but there must be room in composition studies for statistical or quantitative analysis or for science-based experimentation” (19). What Connors wishes to dismiss is “a meaningful thinking,”²⁴ the reflexive adherence to paradigmatic epistemology which Young, Hairston, and Bizzell wish to see enacted. Yet despite the power of Connors’ argument, the discipline has nonetheless spent the subsequent two decades engaged in paradigm-talk: debates between empiricists and non-empiricists, positivists and post-positivists, and advocates of one or another research methodology. In the following section, I will consider some of the effects that ignoring Connors’ argument has had on the field of composition.

²⁴ A term which Connors borrows from psychologist Sigmund Koch (see Connors 19-20).

The Question of Paradigms, 1983 Onward

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate, let alone describe and analyze, the many instances and effects of paradigm-talk in the field of composition studies; a few examples will suffice to illustrate the deleterious effects of tacit paradigm thinking in communication. I begin with Reed Dasenbrock's discussion of imposed incommensurability in the humanities, a sort of paradigm-induced schizophrenia which has silenced methodological debate in the field.

Dasenbrock's argument refutes the conflation of Kuhn's method of study, sociological historiography, and the object of his study, scientific communities. Understanding Dasenbrock's "Truth and Methods" will help illustrate the effects of paradigm-talk on non-scientific fields.

As a sociological description of the lifecycle of scientific periods, Kuhn's notion of paradigms is a meta-theory: a theoretical description of how other theories operate. As such, engaging in "paradigm-talk" is always necessarily engaging meta-theoretical discourse whether the speaker intends to operate on a meta-theoretical level or not. Invoking a paradigm for one's discipline summons more than the image of a better way, a hard won advance, a triumph over ignorance, and the sharp tools and graphs of science. In the case of composition and literary studies, paradigm-talk has inevitably led to Kuhn's concept of incommensurability, the idea that paradigmatic communities see the world in such radically different ways that communication between groups is impossible.²⁵ In the field of literary studies, the effect of twenty years of

²⁵ Incommensurability is, in fact, one of the fundamental characteristics of Kuhn's scientific paradigms, an essential aspect of the transition from one worldview to another. According to Kuhn,

paradigms differ in more than substance, for they are directed not only to nature but also back upon the science that produced them. They are the source of the methods, problem-field, and standards of solution accepted by any mature scientific community at any given time. As a result, the reception of a new paradigm often necessitates a redefinition of the corresponding science. Some old problems may be regulated to another science or declared entirely "unscientific." Others that were previously non-existent or trivial may, with a new paradigm, become the very archetypes of significant scientific achievement. And as the

paradigm-talk led to both tacit acceptance and active theorization of incommensurability. In his 1995 article “Truth and Methods”, Reed Dasenbrock directs his attention to the assimilation of paradigms and incommensurability by English scholars.

Dasenbrock’s Literary Studies: Paradigms in the Humanistic Fields

Dasenbrock’s primary concern is the lack of debate over methodology brought upon by belief that truth and evidence discovered by or within one community do not exist beyond it. Dasenbrock explains how literary theories such as Harold Bloom’s Freudian repression theory and Stanley Fish’s Reader Response criticism have inculcated a belief in the impossibility of communication. As every group operates under its own theoretical aegis and thus its own set of methodological and epistemological assumptions, no two groups can reach consensus on what is real or relevant. “Convinced that no such consensus or common ground is attainable or even conceivable, we have agreed to disagree and to leave it there. Methods of literary study, much like taste, have become something there is little point in discussing” (546). Since theories dictate methods and methods observations, members of different “interpretive communities” (i.e., paradigms) do not share the conceptual networks, observations, or even so much as the words necessary for discussion:

We cannot meaningfully disagree about evidence because what we count as evidence is a function of our general theories about what constitutes evidence. We can only discuss such evidential claims if our theories coincide, but of course then we won’t need to discuss evidence since we will see and count the same things as evidence... We are unable to demonstrate the truth of our interpretations since they depend on our methods, of our methods since they depend on our theories, or even of our theories since there is no genuinely neutral way to test them. (549)

problems change, so, often, does the standard that distinguishes a real scientific solution from a mere metaphysical speculation, word game, or mathematical play. The normal-scientific tradition that emerges from a scientific revolution is not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable with that which has gone before. (Kuhn 103)

For individuals or communities operating under such a paradigmatic vision of theoretical incommensurability, discussion between groups is not only ineffective but impossible.

My point in introducing Dasenbrock's assessment of the situation in literary studies here is not at all to argue that Young and Hairston were right in claiming composition is or should be a paradigmatic discipline. Instead, I cite Dasenbrock's assessment to propose the following narrative: The use of Kuhnian terminology initiated an intense disciplinary interest in his model; that interest led not only to wide (if shallow) familiarity with his scheme as it applies to scientific communities but to a growing (if tacit) belief that one's own professional community develops paradigmatically; ultimately, that belief becomes so ingrained in the language-culture of the community that its members see paradigms everywhere. Seeing paradigms everywhere encourages one to act as if they were real. When one believes that the methods and language used by others to observe and describe reality are incommensurable with one's own, all attempts to communicate cease. To paraphrase Kuhn, if what are ducks for me are rabbits for you, we cannot discuss them effectively or profitably, let alone agree which wine to serve them with at dinner.

For Dasenbrock, such an application of Kuhnian theory to the humanities is incoherent and untenable. It is, in Dasenbrock's terms, an attempt to attend to what Kuhn says as opposed to what he does. If we attempt the reverse, attending "to what Kuhn does as opposed to what he says, we find a careful historian attentive to the problems of historical representation but firmly committed to the notion that, because historical evidence is not [as] viciously theory-dependant [as scientific evidence is], historical objectivity is attainable" (558). Kuhn's theory states that any given scientific community operates within a language-culture that sees what it is predisposed to see. In other words, there is no theory-independent evidence and thus no way to discover

evidence to support one's truth claims regarding nature in contrast to another theory. If we mistakenly apply Kuhnian methods to history and the humanities, we run headfirst into paradox: "If Kuhn is right, he shouldn't be able to see and say the things he does" (555). If interpretation and theorization are based on evidence presupposed by one's interpretive theory, Kuhn cannot claim the "transparadigmatic or 'God's eye' view" necessary to make truth-claims regarding the history of science. However, if we keep Kuhn where he originally situated himself—as my arguments above suggest we should—we avoid the paradigmatic paradox.

In Dasenbrock's discussion (which focuses on New Historicism), the hinge is the shift from objectivist models to what he terms "post-objectivism," a model based on the misreading of Kuhn described above. As New Historicism sees all of history, including all evidence and truth claims, as pure interpretation, method becomes a strictly rhetorical matter. All evidence exists only as we have perceived and interpreted it to exist, thus post-objectivism's "notion of truth" becomes one which "can rule nothing in or out at all, except of course... the older objectivist model" (551). Dasenbrock strongly contests the tenability of this theoretical stance which "has become a self-fulfilling prophesy over the past generation" (560).

I think that a demonstration that the arguments against the possibility of objective truth which have seemed so convincing over the past generation nonetheless presuppose the very notion of truth they have worked so hard to dislodge is an argument with potential consequences. We read evidential claims very differently depending on whether our theories include or preclude the possibility of theory-independent evidence... If truth is a possibility [in the humanities] then we may wish to discuss which of our competing interpretive methods strike us as bring us closer to the truth. Even if the choice between methods remains a choice between competing communities, it seems to me altogether to the good to have those communities actually compete... If we must choose and if we can choose, I would prefer the give and take of methodological and theoretical debate to the cozy communal solipsism which denies the possibility of intelligent disputation with others who do not agree with us. (560)

To be able to debate each other's theoretical stances and interpretations, we first must be able to discuss each other's methodologies. Thus, as long as scholars insist on forcing the humanities

into a paradigmatic mold, our discussions will inevitably lead down the road of “anything goes.” However, as Dasenbrock puts it, if we attend to what Kuhn does and not what he says, we will free ourselves from the relativism inherent in ignoring method, avoiding theory, and enforcing false incommensurability.

The Effects of Paradigm-Thinking in Composition Studies

As Dasenbrock’s argument shows, uncritical acceptance of paradigmatic thinking can disrupt communication, disciplinary development, and healthy debate in a field such as literary studies. However, the lack of debate (“anything goes”) brought upon by theoretical incommensurability is but one of the possible deleterious effects of paradigm-talk in the humanities. In composition studies, the effect of paradigm-talk and its concurrent notion of incommensurability has had a somewhat different effect: instead of encouraging an attitude of “anything goes” both in the field and journals, incommensurability in composition fosters methodological partisanship.²⁶ Davida Charney, summarizing her view of the debate in composition research, puts it thusly:

Rather than improving our methods and findings through reuse, critique, and modification, we now denounce them as flawed or ideologically suspect and discourage their use. As a result, our disciplinary preoccupation with a researcher’s character [defined as that researcher’s paradigmatic allegiance] is pulling us away from substantive research on reading and writing—and diminishing our ability to promote effective social action. (“Paradigm and Punish” 565)

Thus, in literary studies over-subscription to the idea of incommensurability has had the effect of silencing methodological discussion while in composition studies its effect has been the exact opposite, provoking incongruous methodological debates which have drastically affected the

²⁶ We could describe this difference as that between pure anarchism and two-party representative democracy. In the first case, the situation is one of every scholar for his- or herself; movement is based primarily on any given scholar’s charisma and rhetorical ability and can go in any direction. In the second, each “party” centers around a core group united by ideology and methodology; movement is also based primarily on rhetoric but, given that there are two core parties, is limited to something akin to that of a match of tug-o-war.

creation of knowledge in the field. These debates, unlike those called for by Dasenbrock, are so overwritten by paradigmatic thinking that participants argue at cross-purposes.

The debate between Davida Charney and Marilyn Cooper in the pages of *College Composition and Communication* is one example of this problem. In “Empiricism is Not a Four-Letter Word”, Charney makes a reasonable apologia for empirical studies in composition. Responding to accusations of positivism and patriarchalism in empirical inquiry, Charney argues well her thesis that “critics of science often conflate methods and ideologies in simplistic ways” (569). While she does not use the term “paradigm” in the following passage, in light of my reading of Dasenbrock it is easy to see how Charney’s argument is directed towards a group which has made the question of empirical methods in composition into one of paradigmatic incommensurability:

In the world view that the critics [of empirical methods] offer, intellectual authority becomes a commodity that the academic elite buys into at will. With the means of producing authority unfairly monopolized by scientific disciplines, empirical researchers in composition are portrayed as petty sycophants, imitating scientific merchandizing in a futile effort to attract a better market share. In rejecting this perspective, I argue that no research method per se can deliver up authority or acceptance. Rather, credence—and provisional credence at that—emerges from day-to-day critical negotiation in which disciplines identify interesting questions, decide what kinds of answers to consider, and actively critique both methods and results. (569)

Unlike Hairston, Charney is not calling for one composition paradigm based on empirical methods. Instead, she calls for a democratic methodological pluralism, whereby each researcher’s methods are read and received based on their own merits (“provisional credence,” in her words). But to achieve this fully democratic state, scholars of composition must abandon the partisanship encouraged by paradigm-talk: “Critics of science in composition studies often treat it as a timeless, unitary ideology that blends objectivity and quantitative analysis²⁷ with whatever

²⁷ Which, as I have shown, many readers have taken Kuhn’s work to mean, despite his arguments to the contrary.

other philosophies they dislike” (569). In other words, Charney’s critics are creating a false sense of incommensurability because they have so internalized their belief in paradigms that they refuse to grant even provisional credence to research they would not themselves conduct.

Thus, Charney’s empiricists and her critics of science do not suffer from true Kuhnian incommensurability; unlike true paradigm communities separated a priori by paradigmatic differences, these groups are separated by choice, professional hostility, and self-imposed methodological illiteracy. In Charney’s description, critics of science refuse to learn the language of empirical methodology because they presume its ideological underpinnings. Much like Dasenbrock’s literary scholars, whose mistaken conflation of scientific theories with literary theories allowed an inappropriate importation of incommensurability, Charney’s critics have conflated the natural sciences’ ideal of absolutist and positivist empiricism with the quantitative empirical methods adapted by the social sciences.²⁸ And much like Dasenbrock’s argument, Charney’s argument is oriented towards restoring communication between groups which have isolated themselves by their adherence to false paradigmatic thinking. Calling for an end to the “exclusionary identity politics”²⁹ which has resulted from this type of thinking, Charney argues that “it is more productive to view these [qualitative and quantitative] methods as

²⁸ In other words, the natural sciences’ ideology, which forms the foundation for Kuhn’s theory of paradigms, with the social sciences’ methodology, which Kuhn does not see as indicative of paradigmatic exemplars (i.e., his “Second Contribution” in *Revolutions*, pg. 208).

²⁹ When we look at imagined paradigms instead of looking at individual researchers and individual research methods, we essentialize their work, their intentions, and, ultimately, their very beings:

What is striking is how much these characterizations smack of the worst kind of exclusionary identity politics. They essentialize researchers on the basis of their methods. Methodological choices are taken as reliable indicators of morality, personality, and epistemology. To wit: those who reduce people to statistics cannot possibly appreciate the richness and complexity of an individual human life, while those who write insightful and vivid descriptions of a unique situation must be sensitive and caring and therefore more trustworthy as observers. (Charney 581-582)

complementary and overlapping” (582). Ultimately, “the only way to progress as a discipline is to undertake the hard task of inter-connecting our work, by building up provisional confidence in our methods and our knowledge base by challenging and impressing each other” (591).

Despite Charney’s effort to initiate more democratic communication between writing researchers, paradigm-thinking has so infused the discipline that her methodological apologia was taken by Marilyn Cooper as an ideological attack on the “critical research paradigm.”

Cooper states that she, like Charney, “strongly supports the use of multiple paradigms of research in composition” (556, emphasis mine). However, she goes on to claim that

Unfortunately, as Charney argues with “critics in composition [who] have demonized scientific practices and practitioners” (590), she, in turn, demonizes critical research in writing, and instead of delivering on her promise of openness to multiple paradigms in writing research, asserts that “systematic objective methods” (588) are the only methods that can produce valid and sharable understandings. (556)

There is a severe problem with this claim, one based on Cooper’s adherence to paradigms. My analysis of this problem—a problem which is widespread in composition’s insistence of paradigm-talk—is ultimately the purpose of this paper and the reason for my extended discussion of Young, Hairston, Bizzell, and Connors. Like Dasenbrock, I wish to illustrate how paradigm-talk and paradigm-thinking has derailed discourse in our field.

Charney never argued for “the use of multiple paradigms of research”—which by definition would be incommensurable—in her article.³⁰ Despite this fact, Cooper begins her response to Charney by immediately ascribing paradigms to methodologies:

My object here is not to defend critical research, but rather to argue that debates over objectivity and ethics in research are often, as in Charney’s article, muddled by ignorance of, or a refusal to acknowledge, the fact that all research paradigms do not share the same notion of what knowledge is, how it is produced, and how it accumulates. The particular

³⁰ Charney uses the term once: “A new method or procedure that gains acceptance in a particular arena may become inscribed for a time as the standard of an experimental paradigm” (579). This usage, while somewhat confusing given her occasional reference to Kuhn, cannot be read in the Kuhnian sense but rather in the original meaning as a set or standard.

methods used in different paradigms thus also differ and need to be evaluated on how well they achieve the goals of the particular paradigm. (556)

While she herself laments the “slippage in the use of terms” in the literature, Cooper compounds a problem that wouldn’t otherwise exist by allowing herself to conflate research methods with the notion of paradigms. As I have argued in my description of Young, Hairston, and Bizzell, the problem with Cooper’s argument is that by invoking paradigms she forces (and in fact argues for the existence of) an unnecessary dichotomy. Taking Charney’s comparison of qualitative and quantitative research methods as a juxtaposition of competing, incommensurable paradigms, Cooper essentially argues that the comparison is untenable. As each “paradigm” exists in its own epistemology, each should worry about its own methods and standards of objectivity. In other words, Cooper indirectly calls for the very lack of debate which Dasenbrock criticizes.

To put it in different terms, the problem with Cooper’s claim is that Charney never quite “demonizes” qualitative research so much as she points out that it possesses as many drawbacks and contestable premises as quantitative research does and that the only way for researchers to overcome these drawbacks is to allow their work to overlap and compliment each other.³¹ For Cooper, this comparison of methods is in fact a comparison of paradigms which, due to paradigmatic incommensurability, is untenable. This, however, is a misapplication of “paradigmatic laws” to a non-paradigmatic discipline. As North, Connors, Charney, and others have both argued and shown, methodological differences in evidentiary forms (numerical vs. narrative descriptions, for example) do not constitute incommensurability in the human sciences. Clinical psychologists and experimental psychologists discuss and use each other’s research constantly, as critical researchers and empirical researchers in composition can and should.

³¹ In Charney’s words: “my central purpose was to discredit efforts to slot researchers into neat ideological pigeonholes in the first place” (“Paradigm and Punish” 562)

As long as compositionists insist on confounding Kuhn's structure of scientific revolutions with research methods and development in composition studies, attempts at discourse (and the knowledge that can spring from that discourse) will continue to fail. Yet, as Yood and I have shown, the history of paradigm-talk in composition has lasted over forty years and is showing no signs of slowing down. The question remains: if paradigm-talk is so damaging, why do we continue to engage in it? Robert Connors suggested the prestige and authority that seems to surround the sciences. But as my discussion of Charney and Cooper's debate illustrates, science has been the vilified paradigm as often as the glorified one. Charney proposes another possibility in her response to Cooper:

What's the point of trying to hang on to a set of ideological labels that just don't fit? One reason may be that the depersonalization of talking about paradigms blunts the apparent force of aspersions cast on real people. The reified paradigms, rather than the researchers operating within them, become the object of ideological critique. ("Paradigm and Punish" 563)

It may just seem too awkward for us to criticize a specific researcher's methods, especially if we ourselves have never conducted similar research, are unfamiliar with the discipline from which it was taken, or are disturbed by its unfamiliar terms and methodology (e.g., Charney's description of the reactions and responses to quantitative research in "Empiricism"). Paradigms have become the straw men of composition studies, allowing us to assume a language that parallels (if inaccurately) that of the sciences and attack each other's methods in a rhetorically successful (if patronizing) manner. Individually or taken together, neither of these effects would be critically detrimental if isolated to one article or even one decade's worth of articles. That they have become almost invisible and nearly ubiquitous in our discourse is troubling.

CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION: A “POST-PARADIGM” COMPOSITION?

Making Tacit Dangers Explicit

I have focused on the effects of paradigm-talk and paradigm thinking on composition methodology, our scholarly research and academic discourse. However, paradigms in composition have had at least one other effect which I should mention, if only briefly. In his 1999 essay “Stepping Yet Again into the Same Current”, George Pullman reconsiders the history of the writing-process movement. Approaching Young’s “paradigm shift” as a “rhetorical narrative,” Pullman considers some of the causes and effects of paradigm-talk and argues that “the reason that the great paradigm shift never took place is that [in this case] the paradigm is really a metaphor for a rhetorical situation” (27).

Pullman makes several salient points. On a historical level, claiming that writing-process was a scientific revolution vis-à-vis a paradigm shift “masks the fact that one can find previous instances of process within composition theory and practice” (23). Pullman traces a history in which “the writing process was not, in other words, so much discovered as created and not so much created as imported” (23). Citing several theorists who approached writing as a process before Daniel Fogarty’s famous coining of the term “current traditional rhetoric,” as well as several contemporary movements with similar premises (reader-response criticism, workshop-oriented creative writing classes), Pullman shows that the “crisis-revolution-paradigm” narrative is a false one:

. . . thinking that the writing-process theory was derived solely from empirical observation obscures the influence of broader educational, social, and technological changes. In order to describe the writing-process movement solely as a triumph of empirical observation over tradition, it is necessary to construct a context for the empirical research which not only slights the history of composition but also fails to acknowledge the ideological implications and motivations of that research. (23)

For Pullman, staking out a paradigm is to claim both an absolute grasp on “the” truth and absolution from the muddier truths of the past.

Thus, on an epistemological level, looking at “the” writing process as “the” paradigm of composition has the same effect as looking at Newton’s gravity as “the” gravity of the universe—it privileges a particular view of a particular object. In this case, the privileged object is “good” writing: “The idea that what ‘good’ writers know is what all would-be writers need to know, the principle on which the writing-process movement was based, rests on a number of constitutive prejudices” (24). Namely, that good writers were those discussed in literature classes, that personal essays were the exemplars of writing as a discipline, and that clarity—in thought as reflected by the essay and established, no matter what the circumstances, “using the same iterative sequences of brainstorm-draft-revise-peer review” (26)—was key. Where such a paradigm leaves “non-creative” writers, those with goals inconsistent with the form and function of essays, and those lacking the time necessary for the essay’s prerequisite “leisure and reflection,” is hard to say.

Paradigm thinking and paradigm-talk have encouraged us to absorb “the academy’s notion that knowledge produces insight without fully recognizing that the object we are looking at is only an object in a trivial sense” (27). Paradigms, by definition, require a world of objects and processes that can be theorized (and which, according to Kuhn, always already are). Pullman argues, however, that “writing, whether the acts or the products of the acts, cannot be usefully theorized” (27) because any given text “cannot be evaluated once and for all . . . every time it is read its effects are at least slightly different, and we cannot know a text apart from its effects except in the trivial sense of word counts and fog indexes and physical properties” (28). To wit:

Because the product is unstable, the process that produces that product cannot be described fully, except in particular circumstances . . . but to assume that such an example or even a

huge database of such examples would yield a description of the process of writing is to assume a uniformity that does not exist. Writing is not epistemic in the sense that no one true system of explanation can be constructed out of analysis and codified in a textbook in such a way that anyone can teach anybody else how to write in fifteen weeks. (28)

On an ontological level, then, thinking of writing process as a paradigm has tricked us into forty years of looking at writing as if it were a stable object that can be theorized, measured, and plotted as one might the trajectories of bullets or the mating patterns of gazelle. Whether we have individually or collectively preferred quantitative methods or qualitative ones, “thick” verbal descriptions or thick stacks of statistical data, empirical research or critical discourse, above and beyond these distinctions has rested a notion of a “writing process paradigm” that prejudices our observations and predisposes our analysis.

Yood’s Composition of Change

Which brings my argument back to Yood and the thesis of this essay: people are not objects but subjects, our students cannot be generalized or abstracted in the ways science does so with phenomena, and composition cannot be and should not try to be science (and thus, cannot and should not try to be paradigmatic). I cannot state this as well as Yood does:

This does not mean that we cannot record, cannot know, cannot be convinced or convince others about the worthiness of our pedagogies or programs. Rather, it implies that we do so with the knowledge that even as we write our new present, it is moving, connecting with the public and philosophical processes of our times No prescription for the future then, just a process for coming to know, and change, the emerging present. (“Present-Process” 17)

Kuhn’s sociological study of science is a fascinating account of scientific history; it uncovers unexpected and revealing truths regarding the nature of science, scientific communities, and scientific knowledge; it can serve as an interesting and potentially useful analogy of other professional communities. However, once the analogy becomes overlay, once we stop thinking of paradigms as inseparable from the form and function of the natural sciences and attempt a piecemeal application of scientific processes or paradigmatic subjectivities to the

humanities, the effects are as unobvious as they are unproductive. As students and scholars of language we must consider the consequences (as we have the causes) of transplanting terms with specific meanings to alien landscapes.

If composition degenerates into taxonomy—of students, of genres, of cultures—or nosology—of writing problems, of acculturation issues, of institutional symptoms—then we will have failed. The same will apply in the case of wholesale importation of measurement and experiment as general operative and normalizing frameworks. Granted, all such studies are necessary and valuable (if not always scientific in the positivist-empirical sense) but neither their form nor findings should define our field. We must be Socratic as well as Aristotelian, speculative and (inter-)subjective as well as scientific, and bound not to some sense of disciplinary unitarianism but instead and only to the needs of our students. It is our challenge—in the best and worst senses of the term—to meet every new student, every new class, and every new contribution to the discipline in an open field of dialog. We cannot do so from within an ideology of paradigms—the very idea of paradigms precludes such a possibility.

Most importantly, we must look at our own work—at the content of our scholarly journals—and find ways to practice what we teach: communication and dialog, effective discourse and profitable debate. If the status quo remains as is—if every compositionist in his or her role as scholar is talking to no one but his- or her-self—then we have abandoned disciplinarity in any recognizable sense of the term.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Richard Paez was born in 1979, in West Palm Beach, Florida. The first of two adopted children, Richard was raised in Boca Raton, Florida, and Tokyo, Japan, but lived in Miami, Florida while attending South Miami Senior High School. During his last 2 years of high school Richard lived on his own and focused nearly exclusively on textual and cultural studies. He earned his B.A. in English with a focus on psychology from UF in 2006 and began work on his Master of Arts degree in English rhetoric and composition later that same year.

In addition to his ongoing work in rhetoric and composition, Richard's studies focus on Libertarian political philosophy, speculative fiction, narratology, and the allegorical figures of the insect and the android. Richard's interests in culture and identity construction as well as social and economic dynamics has led him to study narrative and communication in writing, media, and psychology. Outside of his scholarly work, Richard is an avid cook (American cuisine and Cuban/Asian fusion), home improvement enthusiast, and Bill of Rights supporter. As of 1999 Richard has held two State of Florida professional certifications, one as a Class "D" Security Officer and the other as a AB1 State Registered Real Estate Appraiser.

Upon completion of the M.A. program, Richard will move to Tampa, Florida with his wife-to-be, Jennifer Vasani. There, he and Jennifer will purchase a home and start a family. Jennifer plans to teach English to middle and high school students and Richard plans to find work in management and document design. He also hopes to serve as a consultant to local entrepreneurs, continue teaching at the college level, and pursue his studies as an independent scholar. Richard lives with his fiancée, Jennifer, his dog, Cassie (a hound-Rottweiler mix), a cat, his ever-growing collection of cooking equipment. Upon purchasing his home Richard will plant a herb and vegetable garden, build a workshop, and construct an archery target range.